DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 783 CG 022 993

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TITLE The Impact of Pre-Adult Appearance-Related Experiences on Young Adults' Personality.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (61st, Philadelphia, PA, March 29-April 1, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Correlation; Higher Education; *Models; *Personality Development; *Personality Traits; *Physical Attractiveness; Social Experience

ABSTRACT

Reviewers of the physical attractiveness literature have concluded that there is a strong general link between attractiveness and personality with most "good-looking" people having positive personalities and their less well-endowed compatriots possessing relative negative qualities. The attractiveness-personality covariation is often explained, either implicitly or explicitly in terms of a simple self-fulfilling prophecy model. This study tested an alternative framework for the appearance-personality relationship which offers a more comprehensive view of the appearance-related inputs into personality development. In the first session of the study the subject's physical attractiveness was unobtrusively assessed by four raters, and subjects (N=243) completed an omnibus personality inventory. In the second session personal history data were collected from a subset of 32 extremely attractive and 32 extremely unattractive females. The data revealed that the looks-generated self-fulfilling prophecy provided an insufficient account of how personality is shaped by appearance. The key predictor suggested by the model did not account for a significant amount of variation in personality. In contrast, the more general and explicit model of the attractiveness-personality relationship revealed that a combination of three types of life experiences accounted for a substantial proportion of the variability in the social participation dependent measure. Further analyses suggests that the best causal model for explaining the looks-personality relationship, however, involves the independent, non-redundant contributions of physical attractiveness and only one of the three general learning mechanisms, appearance-related self-guided activities. (ABL)

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ED326783

The Impact of Pre-Adult Appearance-Related Experiences on Young Adults' Personality

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Paper presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, March 30, 1990.

CG022993

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Many reviewers of the physical attractiveness literature conclude that there is a strong and general link between attractiveness and personality, with most "good looking" people having positive personalities and their less well endowed compatriots posessing relative negative qualities (cf. Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Adams, 1982; Patzer, 1985; Berscheid & Walster, 1972). The attractiveness-personality covariation is often explained, either implicitly or explicitly in terms of a simple self-fulfilling prophecy model (see for example, Adams, 1985, p. 134-135). In the present paper, both the current causal model and a more general and precise alternative framework for the study of physical appearance and personality will be described. A description and presentation of the results of a study designed to provide a preliminary test of both the existing framework and the proposed alternative will follow.

The self-fulfilling prophecy as an explanatory mechanism suggests that the link of looks to personality is simple and direct: (1) Target attractiveness activates a Beauty is Good stereotype in the perceiver. (2) This leads the perceiver to make positive assumptions about the target's personality, which in turn, (3) results in positive behaviors by the perceiver toward the attractive (compared with an unattractive) person. (4) As a consequence of repeatedly receiving differing social reactions by multiple others, individuals of varying levels of attractiveness internalize differential treatment so that positive responses translate into positive personalities and negative responses or treatment by others translate into negative personalities. As it currently stands, this model is too general. It implies that all personality inferences will be directly and equally influenced by a target's attractiveness, that all "treatment" people receive from others is based on looks, and that the sole basis for personality development is the internalization of positive or negative treatment by others based on a general Beauty is Good stereotype.

To address the shortcomings of the extant model, an alternative conceptual framework was proposed which expands on the current implicit model of the relationship between beauty and personality by considering the content of the physical attractiveness stereotype, and including a more comprehensive set of appearance-related "inputs" into personality. (While non-appearance related-"inputs" are undoubtedly important to personality development, this study began broadening the simple self-fulfilling prophecy by just looking at appearance-based events and experiences.)

Although most researchers testing the attractiveness stereotype have treated its content as comprising "all good things," there is empirical evidence that certain content-specific personality domains vary more strongly and directly with attractiveness than others. For example, in a recent meta-analytic review of the physical attractiveness stereotype literature, Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, and Kennedy (1989) found that the Social Competence and Achievement content domain is more strongly related to good vs. bad looks than seven other content areas. Thus, in addition to including the more comprehensive set of developmental "inputs" to personality to be described next, the proposed alternative model of the looks-personality link considers the strength and generality of the attractiveness stereotype and predicts that the covariation between appearance and personality will be weak and content specific.

The second way the proposed conceptual framework will augment and, in this case, subsume the current implicit model, is by addressing additional "inputs" into personality development. Ashmore (1988) distinguishes three types of learning situations or life experiences that influence how individuals develop their thoughts and feelings about physical appearance in self and others: (1) Contact with and relationships with specific individuals, (2) Exposure to and participation in mainstream [American] culture, and (3) Self-guided activities in environments created by others. These types of events and experience may influence personality above and beyond a looks-based self- fulfilling prophecy by teaching us, among other things, three "lessons" about attractiveness: (1) What is beautiful? [That is, what physical features or "looks" result in the perception of "attractiveness"?], (2) What beauty is [That is, what inferences about qualities in addition to looks can be made on the basis of perceived attractiveness?], (3) What is the personal importance or value placed on beauty, and how does one obtain the skills necessary to achieve beauty or at least maximize one's physical attractiveness?

The first set of learning experiences in Ashmore's alternative model, Contact with and relationships with specific individuals, includes and subsumes the extant implicit framework which specifies that individuals of varying levels of attractiveness receive differential treatment and, as a result, develop divergent personalities. Treatment by others presumably teaches us "what is beautiful? (and what is not) and "what beauty is". For example, an overweight boy who is often called "fatso" (with obvious negative affect and teasing) by many different people is likely to learn

that "fat is not beautiful" and "I am fat; therefore, I am not attractive". Such treatment is also likely to teach him what "goes with" being fat--unpopularity. By implication, the overweight boy may learn that fat people are assumed to be unpopular and, more generally, thought to be "bad" in social activities. Additionally, if the boy is often teased and excluded, he may not have the opportunity to learn social skills and may, in fact, become "unsociable." Clearly treatment by others based on one's appearance may have an impact on personality development in a manner implied by the simple implicit framework.

However, the proposed alternative framework takes a step further in explaining the appearance-personality relationship by considering the following: (1) First, not all treatment by others is strictly and directly based on looks and not all appearance-related treatment is as straightforward as the preceding scenario suggests. For example, the overweight boy may be part of an extended family whose members care little about weight and who love the child and make that love clear in their treatment. This non-appearance related positive treatment may be more predictive of this child's adult personality than his "bad looks" will be. (2) Second, there is more to "contact with and relationships with specific individuals" than overt treatment. An especially important source of learning "what is beautiful?", "what beauty is", and how one acquires the skills necessary to obtain good looks, occurs by means of modeling and identification. Through observational contact with specific others, people can acquire information that reinforces the Beauty is Good message or that undermines it. For example, Ashmore indicates (1988) that "children of consensually unattractive parents who are also nice and productive will be less likely to adopt societal definitions of what is 'ugly' and less likely to accept the consensual stereotype that "ugly is bad." As a consequence, they may be less likely to develop "bad personalities." Consistent exposure to examples of individuals who are "incongruent" with the Beauty is Good message might cause such children to develop notions of beauty and ugliness that differ from those implied by the physical attractiveness stereotype, and are clearly not addressed in the extant implicit model of the appearance-personality relationship.

The second class of mechanisms for learning about attractiveness in self and others, exposure to and participation in American culture, goes completely beyond the current causal model of the relationship between physical beauty and personality development. Through the mass media

(newspapers, television, and other means of communication that reach large audiences) people are exposed to many messages about physical appearance. One of the most prevalent and dominant themes expressed through these cultural media is that Beauty is Good. More specifically, people learn, through media exposure, "what is beautiful?" (e.g., a man who is "tall, dark, and handsome"), and "what beauty is" (e.g., owning classy cars and luxurious apartments, and going "out on the town" nightly with a multitude of gorgeous associates).

Participation in various types of mainstream American cultural organizations can also accentuate and emphasize the dominant Beauty is Good message (e.g., taking part in beauty contests). On the other hand, selective participation in less appearance-related activities and exposure to certain types of media can provide alternative messages to viewers/readers about beauty, what goes with it, and what its' importance for self and others is.

Both exposure to, and participation in, mainstream American culture may influence personality development in a manner unaccountable for in the simple extant framework. That is, such inputs can add to the Beauty is Good effect, or they can reduct it. An example of two contrasting young girls illustrates the point. One girl is consensually quite physically attractive, participates in beauty contests, reads Glamour magazine, and watches prime time television every evening. The second girl is slightly unattractive (in the eyes of most observers), participates in Little League baseball, reads sports magazines, and watches athletic events on TV (avoiding prime-time shows). These girls, through differential contact with and exposure to culture, may acquire very different knowledge regarding "What is beautiful?", "what beauty is," and what it requires to make oneself attractive. Additionally, although it is doubtful that the second girl will be totally unaware of the importance society places on attractiveness, she may view a pretty foace as a less important personal asset than a good throwing arm. And, in terms of the looks-personality relationship, her exposure to and participation in American culture may help her form a positive personality, an outcome not predicted by the simple self-fulfilling prophecy model.

The third area distinguished by Ashmore (1988) as an imput to learning about physical appearance in self and others consists of activities, which are either directly or indirectly related to appearance, that individuals undertake voluntarily but with "tools" provided by others. Such activities (e.g., a little girl playing "dress-up" with her mother's clothes) can influence stereotype-

related personality development by "making the child more concerned with and knowldegeable about appearance and also increasing the value placed on attractiveness" (Ashmore, 1988). For example, one might expect an attractive little girl who plays with "Barbie's Beauty Boutique", dresses up "like Mom" to look pretty, and has her own make-up kit to consider attractiveness a more important personal asset and have more skill at making herself attractive than an equally pretty little girl who prefers painting or coloring. If the second child places less value on the "importance" of beauty, she may be less knowledgeable of what "goes with" attractiveness (e.g., sociability) and less skillful at enhancing her appearance.

In summary, the proposed alternative framework for the appearance-personality relationship offers a more comprehensive, albeit general and preliminary, view of the appearance-related inputs into personality development. This new model, in addition to predicting that the attractiveness-personality covariation will be quite specific, suggests three general appearance-related developmental mechanisms, one of which subsumes the simple self-fulfilling prophecy explanation, that can either enhance or reduce the dominant Beauty is Good message and its impact on personal development.

Method

Two hundred and forty-three female Rutgers University introductory psychology students participated in the first session of a two-part correlational study. In this session the subject's physical attractiveness was unobtrusively assessed by 4 raters (2 male, 2 female) and participants completed an omnibus personality inventory (the Jackson Personality Inventory [JPI; 1976]) containing subscales indexing traits of varying degrees of psychological connectedness to good looks. In the second session, personal history data was collected from a subset of 32 extremely attractive and 32 extremely unattractive females.

The second data-gathering session consisted of a unique combination of interactive interview phases and periods in which subjects responded to the Life History of Physical Appearance Questionnaire (LHPAQ). The LHPAQ is a retrospective instrument specifically designed for the present study and for use with young adults. This interview-questionnaire procedure was designed to assess the "causal" factors suggested by the simple self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e.,

appearance-based treatment by others) as well as the three other types of appearance-related events and experiences proposed as part of the more general and comprehensive model of the attractiveness-personality relationship. A more detailed description of the LHPAQ is provided in the Appendix to this document)

Results

To test the strength and generality of the looks-personality relationship, scores on the 16 Jackson Personality Inventory subscales were correlated with physical attractiveness ratings for the entire sample (N=243) and for the extremes (N=64). These results are presented in Table 1 along with univariate F-ratios and means on each scale for attractive and unattractive sample. As can be seen for the larger sample, as physical attractiveness increases, Self Esteem and Anxiety significantly increase and Tolerance significantly decreases.

A multivariate analysis of variance performed on scores of the 16 JPI scales resulted in a significant multivariate main effect for attractiveness condition ($F[17,46]=2.40$, $p<.01$), revealing that overall personality differences do exist between the attractive and unattractive subjects. The results of this analysis are also presented in Table 1. Of these 16 personality traits, only three significant univariate F-ratios were obtained:(1) Attractive females scored higher on measures of Social Participation ($F[1,62]=6.89$, $p<.01$) and (2) Self Esteem ($F[1,62]=4.19$, $p<.05$), while (3) unattractive females scored higher on an index of Tolerance ($F[1,62]=6.73$, $p<.05$). Thus, contrary to most reviewers of the extant literature, the attractiveness-personality covariation was found to be very specific.

The predictive power of the self-fulfilling prophecy model vs the more comprehensive conceptual model was investigated through a series of simple and multiple regressions. Scores on the Social Participation personality trait were used as the dependent measure since both models agree this is the personality attribute that should be most influenced by physical appearance. These results and graphic depictions of the explanatory models are illustrated in Table 2.

The regression analyses revealed that the looks-generated self-fulfilling prophecy provides an insufficient account of how personality is shaped by physical appearance. Regressing APPTREAT (which consisted of scores on a 16-item scale assessing appearance-based treatment by

family and strangers across the Early, Middle, High and Current school years) on Physical attractiveness (i.e., link 1-->2 in the simple causal model.) revealed a "borderline" significant relationship (R^2=.05, p=.06). However, regressing Social Participation personality scores on APPTREAT (i.e., link 2-->3 in the model) revealed that looks-prompted treatment by others is a nonsignificant predictor of personality (R^2=.02, p=.12).

Consistent with the correlations in Table 1, there is a significant amount of variance accounted for in Social Participation by physical attractiveness (R^2=.11, p<.05). When Social Participation is regressed on physical attractiveness and appearance-based treatment simultaneously, the overall amount of variance accounted for is significant (R^2=.12, p<.05), but the regression coefficient for APPTREAT as a predictor is nonsignificant and that for physical attractiveness remains relatively unchanged.

The more comprehensive alternative explanation of the looks-personality relationship predicts that three types of appearance-related learning situations or life experiences will influence personality development above and beyond appearance-based treatment. As can be seen in Table 2, the three predictors account for a significant amount of variation in Social Participation (R^2=.21, p<.01). A comparison of R^2s revealed that this comprehensive model accounts for significantly more variation in "personality" than the simple self-fulfilling prophecy model (F[2,60]=7.20, p<.01). The alternative model is clearly a more powerful "explanation" of the physical attractiveness-personality relationship.

However, contrary to the prediction that all three causal inputs (i.e., Contact with and Relationships with Specific Individuals, Exposure to and Participation in Mainstream Culture, and Self-Guided Activities in Environments Created by Others) would be important in the looks-personality link, it appears that only Self-Guided activities makes a significant contribution to the prediction of the criterion.

Additional correlational and multiple regression analyses were conducted to address the following question: Do appearance-related self-guided activities mediate the effect of physical attractiveness on personality development (as illustrated in model **a** below), or are both variables separate, independent inputs into personality (model **b**)?

a. Physical----------->Self Guided----------->Personality
Attractiveness Activities

b. Physical Attractiveness---------->
Personality
Self Guided Activities---------->

The correlation between Self Guided Activities and Physical Attractiveness was not significant (r=.15, p=.22). Regressing the Social Participation personality trait on Self Guided Activities and Physical Attractiveness simultaneously resulted in a highly significant R^2 (R^2=.31, p<.0001). In addition, the standardized regression coefficients for both SGATOTAL (B=.45, p<.0001) and Physical Attractiveness (B=.26, p<.05) were significant. These analyses support a model in which both attractiveness and looks-related Self-Guided Activities separately influence personality development.

In summary, the data revealed that the looks-generated self-fulfilling prophecy provides an insufficeint account of how personality is shaped by appearance. The key predictor suggested by this model (i.e., appearance-based treatment) does not account for a significant amount of variation in personality. In contrast, the more general and explicit alternative model of the attractiveness-personality relationship revealed that a combination of three types of life experiences accounted for a substantial proportion of the variability in the social participation dependent measure. Further analyses suggested that the best causal model for explaining the looks-personality relationship, however, involves the independent, non-redundant contributions of physical attractiveness and only one of the three general learning mechanisms, appearance-related self-guided activities.

The results of the present investigation raise a number of issues to be addressed in order to better understand the impact of physical appearance and pre-adult appearance-related experiences on young adults' personality. Given the findings that two likely mediators in the looks-personality relationship, treatment by others and self-guided activities, do not work in practice, the investigation of exactly how physical attractiveness impacts personality would be a logical next research step. In addition, a more in-depth analysis elucidating exactly how physical attractiveness, self-guided activities, and personality are developmentally linked is necessary.

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Table 1

The Physical Attractiveness-Personality Relationship

Personality Trait Jackson Personality Inventory	r (n=243)	r (n=64)	F (n=64)	Attract Mean	Unattract. Mean
Anxiety	.137*	.176	2.78	14.22	12.69
Breadth of Interest	-.048	-.109	.67	9.72	10.72
Complexity	-.077	-.150	1.59	10.28	11.38
Conformity	.118	.182	2.78	9.53	7.50
Energy Level	.067	.060	.60	10.97	10.00
Innovation	-.102	-.197	1.96	11.06	13.09
Interpersonal Affect	.110	.188	1.78	14.84	13.59
Organization	.102	.117	1.24	11.59	10.44
Responsibility	-.081	-.135	1.91	11.28	12.31
Risk Taking	-.059	-.102	.80	7.94	9.09
Self Esteem	.126*	.245*	4.19*	13.16	10.75
Social Adroitness	.051	.126	2.68	10.81	9.44
Social Participation	.112	.329**	6.83**	13.47	10.56
Tolerance	-.156*	-.273*	6.73*	10.56	12.81

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$

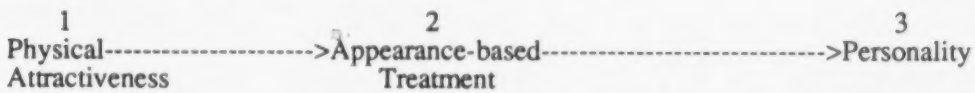
Table 2

A Comparison of the Simple Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Model vs. the More Comprehensive Alternative Conceptual Model In the Prediction of the Social Participation Personality Trait

	Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Model (n=64)			More Comprehensive Alternative Model (n=64)		
	r	B	beta	r	B	beta
I. Contact with and Relationships With Specific Individuals				.28	.06	.10
Appearance-Based Treatment	.20	.13	.20			
Non-Appearance-Based Treatment	--	--	--			
II. Exposure to andParticipation in Mainstream Culture	--	--	--	.15	-.01	-.05
III. Self-Guided Activities in Environments Created by Others	--	--	--	.49***	.08	.49***
		R^2= .02			R^2=.21**	

Note. B is the unstandardized regression coefficient and beta the standardized regression coefficient for each of the predictors. R^2 is adjusted for the number of variables in the equation.

I. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Model



II. Ashmore's (1988) Alternative Model

III. Model Best Supported by Data (R^2=.31****)

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001 ****p<.0001

Appendix: The Life History of Physical Appearance Questionnaire

The LHPAQ contains four sections: Early School Years, Middle School Years, High School years and College/Current Year. LHPAQ items can be divided into two general retrospective categories: (1) Specific aspects of participants' *physical* history consisting of appearance-related *judgements* such as weight, height, physical attractiveness, and disfigurement. (II) Those assessing specific experiences and events falling within each of the three major types of learning mechanisms that might impact personality development: (1) Exposure to and participation in American culture (e.g., "In the average weekday [Monday through Friday], approximately how many hours of television did you watch per day during this period?"). (2) Contact with and relationships with specific individuals (e.g., "During this age period, were you called names by close friends or family because of your physical appearance?"). (3) Appearance-related self-guided activities (e.g, "Did you choose your play or weekend clothes during this period?").

The LHPAQ is used in conjunction with a data sheet that consists of three columns. The first column schematically depicts the common or "normative" school structure and educational divisions in American culture (e.g., Middle School Years most commonly refer to grades six through eight). The purpose of this column is to help subjects carve up or partition their pasts with respect to their age and the year they were in a particular grade. The second column contains shared/national landmarks that occurred between 1968-1988. Events in this column provide common memory cues to help mentally "place" participants back in time. The data sheet also provides a third column in which subjects are asked to list salient personal events in their pasts from each of the four age periods mentioned above. These events provide the "landmarks" to be discussed during interactive-interview phases of this session.

Although the use of retrospective procedures and the resulting data are suspect because people do not have very accurate recall of past events (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982; Turner & Martin, 1984), the use of "landmarks" can increase the accuracy and quality of such data. When subjects are prompted to use, or spontaneously use public (e.g., the eruption of Mt. St. Helens) or private (e.g., one's birthday) landmark events, recall accuracy increases (Loftus & Marburger, 1983; Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979; Yarrow, Campbell & Burton (1970).